

# Classroom misbehavior

## is predictable and preventable

Look for the keys to curbing bad behavior in the patterns and problems of the student offenders; then serve up a healthy dose of engaging lessons.

There is little doubt that students' challenging behavior in schools is always on the minds of teachers, school administrators, and parents. But what precisely are the challenging behaviors of greatest concern? Media portrayals and surveys of public opinion suggest a widespread perception that schools are dangerous places, but data don't support such conclusions. School violence has been on a steady decline for more than a decade. Nonetheless, student behavior presents consistent, albeit less violent, challenges to teaching and learning.

This hypothetical represents what we think is a typical example:

**J**ason is a 7th grader with below grade-level academic skills. He is one of 24 students in a general math class. His teacher Mr. Monroe does his best to present material that all students can understand, but faces the constant challenge that his more capable students will be bored if he moves too slowly through the curriculum, while Jason and others who struggle academically will be lost if he moves too quickly. Predictably, when they're bored or frustrated, students become distracted and disruptive. On this particular day, as Mr. Monroe reviews the process of simplifying fractions by demonstrating a few examples on the smartboard, his capable students essentially ignore this review and engage in their own off-topic conversations, while Jason and his friends begin complaining that "this stuff is too hard," that "Mr. Monroe is a terrible teacher who never explains things right." When Mr. Monroe challenges them to stop talking and pay attention, they escalate their complaints. Jason becomes defiant, and says, "This whole school and all the teachers suck," which draws laughter from a few students. Mr. Monroe threatens a discipline referral to the office if he hears one more word, to which Jason replies, "Fine, that'd be better than sitting in here."

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While extreme forms of school violence, however rare, aren't to be taken lightly, school officials should be more concerned with the far more prevalent examples of problem behavior like that described above, which are seen in most schools every day. Such behavior often occurs in a predictable, escalating cycle if left unchecked (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004), typically resulting in problems of increasing frequency and intensity. Scenarios like Jason's are among the most frustrating, demanding,

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**By Timothy J. Landrum, Terrance M. Scott, and Amy S. Lingo**

and frequent problems teachers face. But three elements of chronic patterns of disruptive behavior give us reason for hope, though our optimism is contingent on schools changing how they view and respond to problem behavior in general.

- **Problem behavior is predictable.**
- **Problem behavior is preventable.**
- **Preventing problem behavior requires attention to instruction.**

Toward the third point, we emphasize that attention to instruction means two things: First, academic instruction must be designed and delivered in a way that engages all students; and second, many of the social and academic skills teachers expect students to display must be actively *taught*. We briefly consider each of the elements of prediction, prevention, and instruction with an eye toward what teachers and administrators must do to reduce and reverse patterns of disruptive, challenging behavior in schools.

#### **PREDICT PROBLEM BEHAVIOR**

Fairly simple analyses consistently show that behavior — positive and negative — generally occurs quite predictably in relation to objects or events in the environment. Some might argue that environmental events may come and go in a random manner, but how students respond to environmental cues is, in fact, highly predictable. If teachers can identify environmental predictors, they can generally manipulate them to prevent undesirable behaviors. Such predictions are based on repeated observations of a behavior in the context of the environment in which it occurs. In Jason's case, above, careful observation and analysis of his problem episodes may reveal that his most common misbehaviors occur during group instruction, when the class is split so that some are working and others talking, or when questions are to be answered orally in front of the class. Identifying these predictors would allow his teacher to be much more prescriptive, both in how he organizes the environment for each lesson and in how he delivers prompts and reminders during the lesson.



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Students with challenging behaviors are more likely to have academic deficits in reading, math, and written language (Lane, Carter, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006). While the precise nature of the relationship between academic deficits and problem behavior remains unclear, indeed presenting a chicken-or-the-egg conundrum, we do know with some certainty that each influences the other in a reciprocal way (Scott, Nelson, & Liaupsin, 2001). Problem behavior contributes to academic difficulties, which contribute to additional behavioral concerns, which further impinge on a student's academic success, and so on. No matter which came first, students identified as having challenging behaviors or academic deficits in the classroom are more likely to experience negative or punitive interactions with teachers, regardless of their behavior; less likely to receive time engaged in instruction with their teachers; and more likely to be subjected to reduced demands and lowered expectations.

### **Use information on predictors to create physical and instructional environments that both avoid predictable problems and create predictable successes.**

As a result of this pattern, we shouldn't be surprised that students with academic or behavioral difficulties don't see school or time in academic classes as exciting opportunities for learning, or even opportunities to demonstrate their success and receive positive acknowledgement for their efforts. Rather, they come to see school itself as an aversive situation. Failure in reading class leads to withdrawal and avoidance of reading tasks, which, in turn, sets the occasion for less instruction and growing academic deficits. For students with academic skill deficits, even physically laborious tasks come to be more appealing than academic activities (Juel, 1988).

The key to prediction is to help teachers consider multiple episodes of behavior and to begin thinking in terms of the larger environment. Imagine, for example, that a teacher were asked something like the following by an outside, objective observer: *"If I were to come in tomorrow to observe for only five minutes, and offered you \$1 million if I could see Jason display his typical problem behavior, when would you have me come observe? Where should I be looking? What would be going on in the environment?"* This gets the teacher thinking seriously about the environment's role in predicting behavior. We think most teachers could answer this question quickly and easily about their most trou-

bling student (e.g., 'show up at 11 a.m., biology, 3rd period; watch him and his lab partner as soon as they're told to start their lab independently...'). As a general rule, if teachers can make such predictions with some accuracy, they're well on their way to preventing the problem behavior in question.

### **PREVENT PROBLEM BEHAVIOR**

There is no shortage of interventions touted as best practice in dealing with difficult behavior, but no single strategy or program has been demonstrated to be effective with all individuals and all types of challenging behaviors in our schools and communities. There is no magic bullet. The most logical, practical, and efficient way to deal with failure is to use information on predictors to create physical and instructional environments that both avoid predictable problems and create predictable successes. We believe that we can increase the odds of academic engagement and positive behavior, though it's absurd to think of raising that rate to 100%. Likewise, we believe that we can lower the odds of problem behavior, but again we'll never lower that rate to zero. Using what we know to increase our odds of success, we think, is simply the best approach we have.

The key to tipping these odds in our favor is to help teachers consider how to use identified predictors to prevent certain behaviors. Think of a follow-up to the earlier hypothetical we posed, with one key alteration; imagine that a teacher is now asked: *"If I were to come in tomorrow at the same time and under the same conditions you just named, but this time I'll give you \$1 million if Jason is successful, rather than disruptive, what would you do differently?"* The object is to help the teacher consider how to use information on predictability to create success. Generally, prevention involves efforts to control those events that are identified as most predictive of student failure, and to teach specific skills that will help the student to more effectively deal with those events.

Teachers can prevent certain behaviors by developing routines and arrangements. Teachers have great control over some things, such as the number of students engaging in a task at one time, the procedure for transitioning from one task to another, and the routine for lining up at the door. Still, controlling the environment is a tricky proposition for teachers. To be sure, we'll never have the foresight or ability to control all of the potential events in school. For example, manipulating where the teacher is located in the room so as to better answer questions or changing the seating arrangement to separate two antagonistic students are simple prevention strategies because the predictors are largely under the teacher's control. In contrast, predictors can't be as easily controlled for a student whose misbehavior is sparked by a peer's



comments or a perceived slight on the playground. While the teacher may create environments where student comments are limited and playgrounds are well monitored, preventing the random remark or look that precipitates a perceived slight will always be much more difficult. Thus, prevention must always involve arranging environmental variables and events that are under a teacher's control to increase the odds of positive engagement and decrease the odds of problem behavior. But, even when we do our best to manipulate the environment to tip the odds in our favor, what teachers do instructionally remains a key ingredient in dealing with challenging behavior.

## ENGAGE THROUGH INSTRUCTION

What teachers do during instruction is often simply a matter of what's most comfortable or familiar to the teacher, often with little attention to evidence-based strategies. Recent large-scale analyses clearly identify instructional practices associated with increased student success (Hattie, 2009). Among the most effective teacher-based practices identified are such basic strategies as teacher clarity, teacher feedback, opportunities for students to respond, modeling, and guided practice. What we find most striking about these strategies is that while they're listed here because of their link to students' academic success, they also provide a high probability of positively influencing student engagement and, consequently, their behavior.

Providing students with opportunities to respond in class, using effective models, and relevant and engaging opportunities to practice, and offering consistent feedback doesn't constitute special programming for students with challenging behavior. Rather, these essential components of instruction allow us to shape and maintain success for all students. The key is to use these effective strategies to help students avoid contexts that predict problems and teach behaviors that will effectively replace and prevent problem behavior. Still, students with challenging behaviors present special problems when teachers are trying to provide effective instruction. Whether a student responds best to group versus individual questioning, verbal versus physical modeling, or private versus group feedback are questions that are determined through the trial-and-error history that's part of the prediction and prevention process.

Feedback may present one of the more difficult issues for teachers, and its

use is crucial. The reluctance to acknowledge positive behavior is sometimes justified by the notion that internal reinforcement — success — is preferable to external reinforcement — praise. While this might be true in certain contexts, the teacher's role in developing, recognizing, and reinforcing initial success is critical. For example, if we asked a student

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to solve a math problem and then refused to let him or her know whether the problem was solved correctly, we wouldn't have taught anything, nor would we have changed the probability of the student's success or failure in the future. While most teachers understand this in the context of academic instruction, positive feedback is often missing in dealing with behavior. Even teachers who routinely praise a student verbally for a correctly performed academic task rarely say 'thank you' to the student who raises a hand in class for the first time or gets to class on time.

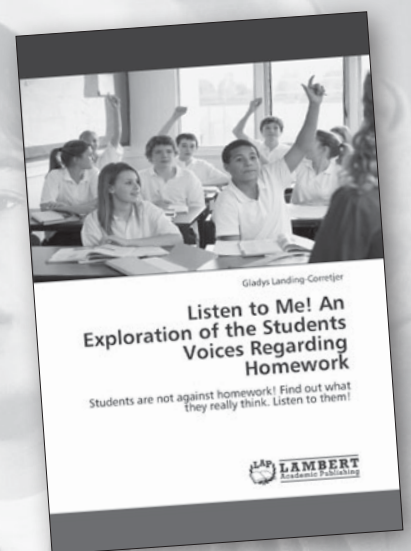
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As a general rule, what makes instruction effective in the academic realm applies equally to teaching social behavior. In all cases, we simply use the tools at our disposal to maximize the probability that the student will be successful with the very next trial.

## **The same routines used to teach and reinforce reading, math, or science concepts can and should be used to teach and promote positive social and classroom behavior.**

### **SUMMARY**

We argue that dealing with difficult behavior is a matter of awareness of the factors involved in prediction, prevention, and instruction. This means three things. First, teachers know or can be assisted in thinking through the environmental events and contexts associated with higher probabilities of problem behavior. Second, based on these predictions, teachers can actively manipulate many of the environmental or contextual variables under their control in ways that increase the odds of students being engaged and displaying positive behavior, and decrease the odds of disruptive behavior. Finally, instruction is key to success in this area. This means that instruction must be designed and delivered in a way that addresses student needs and skill levels appropriately, providing ample opportunities for successful responding. It also means that the same routines used to teach and reinforce reading, math, or science concepts can and should be used to teach and promote positive social and classroom behavior. Consider a potential outcome to the scenario described earlier:

After Jason's suggestion that he'd love to be sent to the office, Mr. Monroe quietly slides a chair next to Jason and sits by him. Mr. Monroe says calmly, "We can talk about that later; right now, get out your math book because I've got a trick solution to show you on our challenge problem. I want you to show the class when you're ready." Jason just scowls. Mr. Monroe takes a look around the room, praises those whose books are out, then picks up Jason's book himself, and opens it to the correct page. "Look at this problem. It's the hardest one, and nobody knows how to solve it, but I can give you a trick to make it work and you'll be the only one who can do it." Jason switches his glance to the book and stares at the problem, finally asking, "What's the trick?" Mr. Monroe talks Jason through the problem, modeling the key procedures, and giving Jason opportunities to demonstrate his understanding. After about two minutes, he leaves Jason and returns to instruction with the entire group. After a few minutes,

he asks students to look at the challenge problem in the book. He says that it's extremely difficult and that it will require someone very smart at math. Several students, including Jason, raise their hands. Mr. Monroe calls on Jason who strolls confidently to the board. As Jason works the problem, Mr. Monroe asks questions to both Jason and the class about why different steps were taken — engaging all in the lesson. As Jason finishes, Mr. Monroe publicly acknowledges his success and then directs the class on to independent work. Jason returns to his desk and slowly brings himself to begin the work.

There are no guarantees that any given instructional or management approach will work with a given student. Indeed, we believe that our best hope is merely to increase our odds of success. If failure has occurred repeatedly, manipulating environmental variables or instructional routines can increase our odds of success. Picking apart Mr. Monroe's response to Jason would be easy, and we recognize that teachers might come at this problem with any number of proposed solutions, potentially including drastic variation from the one described here. Indeed, we accept that any number of responses to Jason might be appropriate. But we return to our original suggestion that effective responses must address the three concerns we raised above: We can predict problem behavior in the classroom; we can manipulate the environment in response to these predictions; and instruction can be used or altered in ways that engage students and ensure success. We think Mr. Monroe's response represents a reasonable approach to the problem. More important, if the alternative is to do nothing, we can say with great certainty that the prognosis for Jason's success in school and life is extremely bleak. **K**

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